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ABSTRACT

The gap between the theory of democracy and its practice is nowhere more evident than in the classroom, where the teachers charged with transmitting democratic values to the next generation of citizens can only repeat democracy's failures. Some people would like to separate liberalism from the concept of democracy, since they believe that the promise of democracy has been damaged by its attachment to liberalism. A different kind of democracy might be better suited to the postmodern age. Advanced ideas of democracy would require giving up the dream of a harmonious collective will and would require examination of the liberal logic of self-interest as well as liberalism's emphasis on competition. Advanced ideas of democracy would also demand an examination of the power relations of public life and attention to issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, and other social conditions. Rethinking the nature of the rational individual of liberalism is a necessity before advanced ideas of democracy can be considered. The individual of liberalism is a stable, unified, and coherent self who moves toward a more enlightened state through the right use of reason. Rationality is a concept that maintains the primacy of this autonomous and responsible self and is the key to its functioning. The logic of the rational liberal individual is a binary logic that establishes dualisms that contribute to privilege for some. Critics of liberalism find the individual to be a site of conflicting discourses, not born into an essential nature, but a creature of multiple and intersecting identities. If a different rationality is applied and a different, less stable subject identified, new ideas of democracy may be developed that promote new approaches to formerly subordinated groups. (Contains 14 references.) (SLD)

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A CRITIQUE OF THE RATIONAL INDIVIDUAL OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

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A Critique of the Rational Individual of Liberal Democracy

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Gayatri Spivak (1989) writes about the "spectacular promise of democracy" (p. 94), and it is surely hard to give up on that promise, even though those of us involved in education may have begun to harbor profound misgivings about both the content and the effects of this concept that seems so ordinary and taken-for-granted in our culture. In fact, some believe there is a "crisis of meaning" (Trend, 1996) associated with the concept *democracy* since we continue to celebrate liberty, equality, fraternity, and justice even as our society experiences, for example, "a chronic disrepair of the social service network . . . the continued tolerance of predatory business interests . .. the consolidation of the media into a handful of corporations . . . wide scale resentment toward government officials and the rise of fringe personas like Ross Perot and Oliver North" (Trend, 1996, p. 8), and increasing social injustice in many arenas of our democracy. The gap between the theory of democracy and its practice widens, and that gap is nowhere more evident than in classrooms, where teachers are charged with transmitting democratic values to the next generation of citizens in schools that can only repeat democracy's failures.

Liberalism, the theory upon which our traditional understanding of democracy is based, is the political project of modernity, and it has a long history reaching back to classical Greece and Rome. However, the chief tenets of liberalism coalesced and flourished during the Enlightenment, when, as Alasdair MacIntyre (cited in Gray, 1995) writes, it was necessary to conceive of "an independent rational justification of morality" (p. 84). The Enlightenment project established certain themes that Jane Flax (1990) describes as follows: that there is "a stable, coherent self"; that "language is in some sense transparent"; that "reason and its 'science' -- philosophy -- can provide an objective, reliable, and universal foundation of knowledge"; that "knowledge acquired from the right use of reason will be 'true'"; that "by grounding claims to authority in reason, the conflicts between truth,

knowledge, and power can be overcome"; and that "freedom consists of obedience to laws that conform to the necessary results of the right use of reason" (pp. 41-42).

From these Enlightenment themes that define in a particular way the individual, language, rationality, knowledge, and truth emerges liberalism, and it has had many manifestations. Generally, however, liberalism is recognized as having the following four characteristics: "it is individualist, in that it asserts the moral primacy of the person against any collectivity; egalitarian, in that it confers on all human beings the same basic moral status; universalist, affirming the moral unity of the species; and meliorist, in that it asserts the open-ended improvability, by the use of critical reason, of human life" (Gray, 1995, p. 86). These characteristics of liberalism, among others, have produced America's version of democracy, liberal democracy, the variety with which we are most familiar.

There are some, however, who would like to separate the concept of liberalism from the concept of democracy, since they believe that the "spectacular promise of democracy" has been stunted, stalled by its attachment to liberalism. Chantal Mouffe (1988), for example, seeks a new imaginary of democracy that would take into account postmodern theories of both psychology and philosophy that trouble the Enlightenment's definitions of knowledge, subjectivity, and rationality. Jacques Derrida (1993) writes that "the current concepts which define democracy are insufficient" (p. 213), yet he is very much attracted to what he calls "the democracy to come" (p. 214), to the space opened up in order for that always inaccessible and impossible event to occur.

Walter Parker (1996), in a well-articulated analysis of democracy in education, writes about this desire for a different kind of democracy, one that is better suited to addressing the complex problems of the postmodern age, by quoting a young Chinese woman who took part in the student uprising in Tiananmen Square in the summer of 1989. He says, "One young Chinese woman, shortly before government troops crushed the uprising, told a Western television reporter that what Chinese students and intellectuals wanted from the United States was its 'advanced technology.' The reporter asked if the protesters were not interested also in any American *ideas*, such as democracy. Her response came quickly: 'Yes, but only if they are *advanced* ideas about democracy'" (p. 105).

This notion of "advanced ideas" about democracy is an intriguing one and seems to call for a "radicalization and deepening of the democratic revolution . . . [which would] extend the democratic ideals of liberty and equality to more and more areas of social life" (Mouffe, 1996, p. 20). Advanced

ideas would require a reconsideration of our country's motto, "E Pluribus Unum," one from many -- the idea that we should aim for a unity that transcends difference. Advanced ideas would require giving up on the "dangerous dream of a perfect consensus, or a harmonious collective will, and accepting the permanence of conflicts and antagonisms" (Mouffe, 1996, p. 20). Advanced ideas would necessitate an examination of the liberal logic of self-interest as well as liberalism's emphasis on competition which necessarily produces losers as it produces winners. Advanced ideas of democracy would require an examination of the systematic inequities of capitalism and the elitism it enables. Advanced ideas would demand an examination of the power relations that permeate and sustain both public and private life. Advanced ideas would require that we reconsider the emancipatory impulses of liberalism that often become impositional. Advanced ideas would require attention to matters of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, wellness, etc. Advanced ideas would require the recognition that politics is not just a set of neutral tools and procedures but the ethical substance of everyday life. In order to pursue these advanced ideas, one must question the very foundations upon which Enlightenment thought rests: its descriptions of epistemology, of the individual, and of rationality.

If one believes that the foundations of the Enlightenment have always been contingent and that its description of the world has always been just that, a description and not the Truth, and, furthermore, a description that is no longer adequate, then redefining these concepts is a seductive job of work, one that promises hope for a different, indeed, an *advanced*, version of many concepts, including democracy.

Those who do qualitative research in education, those of us whose work is epistemological, whose job is, in fact, to *produce* knowledge, have the option of being involved in redescribing at least two foundational concepts upon which the liberal democracy of the Enlightenment rests: the individual and rationality. Actually, rethinking the nature of the rational individual of liberalism is *required* before one can move on to consider advanced ideas about democracy. Therefore, in this paper, I will provide as a point of departure for such discussions both the Enlightenment's version of the individual and rationality as well as critiques of these concepts that have been circulating for the last thirty years or so during which liberalism has come under increasing attack for its inability to deal

with difference, with diversity, with conflict -- with, in fact, a postmodern world that has outgrown the solutions that the Enlightenment offered centuries ago to a very different world.

Liberalism's definition of the individual is the first I will review. The individual of liberalism is considered to be a stable, unified, coherent self who, through the right use of reason, steadily progresses through a linear time toward a more enlightened state. The narrative of progress is evident here in that it is assumed that the individual, as well as the society in which it participates, can solve its problems, can be "fixed," so to speak. At the center of this individual's identity is a unique core that remains unencumbered, unchanged by everyday events and the influence of the others it encounters along the way. This authentic, "centered" individual is a present, conscious, knowing self, one that also, in the Cartesian sense, remains separate from the knowledge it discovers in the world. It has an inherent agency that allows it to make choices, to control its fate; and, with a strong, determined will, it can overcome obstacles in its progress toward perfection. We are very familiar with this notion of liberal individualism, of course. It is one that I have certainly heard all my life -- the idea that if I persist and work hard enough, I will eventually reach my goal. This promise of reward for hard work, of pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps, assumes that the individual can indeed control all those circumstances that are necessary for such an accomplishment to occur.

This is why Michael Peters (1996) explains that "The ideology of individualism privileges the individual in universal and ahistorical terms as the ultimate unit of analysis" (p. 185). The ideology of liberalism implies that the liberal individual can transcend its present and free itself from its insertion into history. In addition, under this description, the liberal individual has certain inherent and natural "rights" that exist regardless of circumstance, rights that transcend relations with other people and ultimately supersede agreements made in the communities in which the individual functions. In liberal individualism, the individual is the both the starting point and the destination of all activity. It is, in the end, an "ahistorical, asocial, and disembodied conception . . . endowed with natural rights prior to society" (Mouffe, 1996, p. 23).

The second concept of liberalism I will discuss is rationality, a concept that maintains the primacy of this autonomous, responsible self and is the key to its functioning. It is reason that enables this individual to control its baser nature, its emotions, to transcend the complexities of the world, and to learn the Truth about things. In Enlightenment thought, reason assumed primacy over

all other ways of acquiring knowledge; in fact, rationality became the unique path to knowledge. The rationality of liberal individualism is highly structured in that it rests on a plethora of categories and hierarachies. Order is imperative; tables and charts are common structures used for labeling and sorting. Things, ideas, and *people* are slotted into grids in order to regulate them, to close them off into categories. What doesn't fit within a given, rationally pre-defined category is considered suspicious, deviant, and unnatural.

The logic of the rational liberal individual is a binary logic, one that sets up dualisms, oppositions such as male/female, black/white, rich/poor, heterosexual/homosexual, public/private, culture/nature, self/other, identity/difference, and, of course, rational/irrational. The first term in these binaries is privileged -- self, of course, is privileged over others, for example -- and many feminists believe that the first, privileged term of a binary is also male. This description of rationality works hand in hand with the prior description of the liberal individual, a unitary, rational subject who is the foundation of all knowledge and signification.

The descriptions of the individual and rationality outlined above are not "natural." They emerged as powerful, dominant groups protected their self-interests by defining and elaborating these fundamental concepts that many now take for granted as the truth. There have, however, been critiques of these descriptions for centuries. Marxism, for example, and the social movement it inspired formed one of the most devastating critiques of the unitary, liberal individual and subject-centered reason. The subject of Marxist theory is not an abstract being who exists apart from social activity, but is a *product* of society, deeply embedded in social relations. In Marxist theory, the beliefs, attitudes, and purposes of individuals are not innate, but rather are matters that must be explained by a critique of the ideology in which the individual is enmeshed.

Freud's and Lacan's theories of the subject and the unconscious have also undermined liberal individualism's description of the subject and rationality. A subject with an unconscious that is almost always simply unavailable, not present, can hardly maintain the kind of coherence and rationality required by the theories of liberalism. Derrida's theory of *différance* requires an unpredictable subject who is *not* stable, not present to itself, one that is constructed in the play of language and cultural practice. Foucault moved through several theories of the subject, from one that is constructed in discourse to a subject who creates itself as the ethical subject of its actions.

Critical and postmodern feminists, queer theorists, postcolonial theorists, and critical race theorists have drawn on the theories of Marx, Freud and Lacan, the critical theorists, and the French poststructuralists in order to rethink the foundational nature of the rational subject of liberalism in order to address problems of gender, sexuality, culture, and race that these theories have enabled and continue to protect.

Those who find the concepts of liberalism no longer useful, and even destructive, question its description of the individual as a unique, authentic, coherent, stable self that remains the same throughout time -- a self that has an inherent agency and inherent rights. Rather, they have to come to believe that the individual is always the site of conflicting discourses, and, as Chris Weedon (1987) explains, "at any particular moment of thought or speech, a subject, subjected to the regime of meaning of a particular discourse and enabled to act accordingly" (p. 34). Weedon's (1997) description presumes that we are born into ideology and its language and practices. We are not born, then, with an essential nature that, for instance, assumes different roles in the course of a day's activities; rather, we are many different selves, multiple and contradictory subjects produced within contradictory communities. Agency occurs in the tension of these contradictions, as race, class, sexual orientation, and gender intersect in complex and confusing ways. David Trend (1996) explains that "far from [being] an independent member of a particular constituency . . . each person belongs to numerous overlapping groups and multiple intersecting identities" (p. 15).

Judith Butler (1990) writes that we are constructed within relationships, that we may perform our identities very differently with different people in different places at different times. In these networks of relations, we are very encumbered, situated as we are in culture and history; yet we are able to interrupt, resignify, and redeploy ourselves as our subjectivities converge and conflict with the others in our lives. In this description, agency emerges from our ability not to repeat the same performance, not to repeat the same identity. Butler (1990) calls this practice, "subversive repetition" (p. 147).

These descriptions do not bid farewell to the subject as some have claimed; instead, they open up the concept for redescription, for some other way of thinking about ourselves outside of the binary logic and transcendent rationality of liberalism. This subject cannot be stable, cannot be coherent, cannot be authentic, does not have inherent agency or rights grounded in the essential

nature of the individual. This is not a knowing, rational subject, an agent who exists apart from the world it encounters since it is constantly constituted and reconstituted by that world. It is very much a subject-in-process. Butler explains why many find this description of the subject so much more promising than the subject of liberal individualism. She says that it is difficult to believe that an essential subject, a "ready-made subject" (Butler, 1992, p. 12) has agency; rather, the idea "that the subject is that which must be constituted again and again implies that it is open to formations that are not fully constrained in advance" (Butler, 1995, p. 135).

The possibilities and implications of such a subject are only beginning to be imagined. Just about every aspect of our lives shifts when we begin to suspect that the liberal individual, the hero of knowledge and of liberty, is simply a fiction, one description of the subject which has served "to legitimate and protect from criticism a specific set of cultural values that are deeply embedded in the West" (Peters, 1996, p. 9). Fredric Jameson (cited in Peters, 1996), in fact, writes that "the bourgeois individual subject [is] a thing of the past; it is also a myth; it *never* really existed in the first place; there have never been any autonomous subjects of that type. Rather, this construct is merely a philosophical and cultural mystification which sought to persuade people that they 'had' individual subjects and possessed this unique personal identity" (p. 38).

Michael Peters (1996) explains how our concept of democracy might change as our concept of the rational individual changes. "The republican ideal postulates a 'public' that comes into being through reason, a rational consensus that assimilates substantive cultural differences and denies the heterogeneity of social life. The welfare state discourse of citizenship identifies the model citizen with the formal individuality of the rationally oriented, freely contracting subject, bracketing out interdependence and what is substantively needy about our lives" (Peters, 1996, p. 12). Since we are constituted differently within and by those different communities of which we are members, neither we nor our "rights" exist apart from those groups. There is no subjectivity outside of relationships. Therefore, social life is constitutive and always political. Social life is also divisive and antagonistic as groups with rival claims and conflicting interests form and reform. The call for dialogue that can somehow produce harmony among these groups becomes suspect, since consensus is most often reached by acts of exclusion -- someone has to stop talking for consensus to be reached.

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Indeed, liberalism ignores relations of power which give some groups more rights than other groups. Even though some liberals may offer to extend the rights of the dominant group to others, William Spanos (1993), following Foucault, suggests that this process is most often intended to accommodate, assimilate, regulate, normalize, and control the subordinate groups -- to neutralize their differences. Along these lines, David Trend (1996) writes that "the common good can never be actualized; it must remain as a kind of vanishing point to which we constantly refer, but which cannot have a real existence" (p. 24).

What kind of democracy will we be able to think once we begin to work with a different subject and a different rationality? And what kind of research will we be able to do in schools that will enable our students to grapple with the new democracy, the "democracy to come" that Derrida, and others of us, desire? What happens when the foundational concepts upon which liberalism rests begin to crumble, when the fictions are no longer adequate?

Chantal Mouffe (1988) quotes Wittgenstein as follows in response to this question that haunts many educators who believe they work in a postfoundational world: "the absence of foundation 'leaves everything as it is,' . . . and obliges us to ask the same questions in a new way" (p. 38). So what are our research questions now? To which problems will we choose to attend? What knowledge has simply been unintelligible in the discourse of liberal democracy? Whose democracy are we working for and for what ends? And what might an advanced democracy look like?

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